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SUBJECT: DAS THOMPSON'S VISIT TO LESOTHO

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¶1. Summary: Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Carol Thompson visited Maseru June 14-16 following her attendance at the Second Annual President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief Conference in Durban, South Africa. She met with the First Lady of Lesotho, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Acting Foreign Minister/Minister of Education, Ministers of Finance, Trade, Natural Resources, leading members of Parliament, key partners in health, civil society, leaders of faith based organizations (FBO's), the media and the business community. DAS Thompson visited USG-funded health projects in the Maseru area. Income-generating projects for persons affected by HIV/AIDS, and Lesotho's central referral hospital. DAS Thompson commented on Lesotho's excellent example of partnership in the face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Ambassador Perry took the opportunity of DAS Thompson's visit to reemphasize to the GOL our support for its sustained commitment to fighting HIV/AIDS and the country's advances in democracy and economic growth and to express our support for peaceful and fair general elections in 2007. End Summary

¶2. In her discussions with several Ministers during the Ambassador's dinner at the CMR, DAS Thompson commended Lesotho on the leadership of government, especially the Prime Minister and King, in addressing HIV awareness and actions to combat the stigma and spread of the epidemic, including openly being tested. Ms. Thompson and the Ministers discussed the many challenges facing the Basotho people including a lack of medical personnel and facilities, the disparity in gender awareness of HIV and how the government is dealing with HIV within its own ranks. They addressed Lesotho's role as the next chair of the Southern African Development Community and the leadership they hoped to transfer to that body. Lesotho's Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) proposal was also discussed, with the Ambassador stressing the importance of the revised proposed Compact being submitted to the MCC as soon as possible.

¶3. Ms. Thompson met with leaders of FBOs to discuss their role in addressing the HIV epidemic. In Lesotho, FBO's have formed a number of inter-denominational organizations through which they address common issues such as HIV. They take advantage of the presence of churches and clergy throughout the country to counter the sparse infrastructure and general lack of communication and transport. The clergy are being trained as first responders with accurate information and lessons of abstinence and being faithful. Catholic Relief Services, in partnership with Peace Corps, presented a project to empower orphans and vulnerable children (OVC's), who now number approximately 180,000.

¶4. Ms. Thompson visited Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, the main

public referral hospital in the country and there spoke to senior government health officials. She was able to observe first hand the resource and staffing challenges. Hospital managers noted that the demand for ART is extremely high, taxing the facilities limited resources, leaving patients (often 100's) waiting in the cold for the one physician available. Ms. Thompson visited the site of a USG- funded program to prevent parent to child transmission.

¶5. At Sea Point, one of the oldest and scrabble poor neighborhoods of Maseru, Ms. Thompson met with the First Lady of Lesotho, Mrs. Mosisili, who supports many community-based palliative care and orphan and vulnerable children organizations at an income-generating project benefiting OVC's and HIV positive Basotho. The Project Director stressed the need for increased support in order to reach more community residents.

¶6. Ms. Thompson toured the USG-funded HIV testing and counseling center of Population Services International (PSI), where she observed the response by Basotho to government leadership and U.S. support to the Know Your Status campaign. She spoke at length with program staff. PSI officials noted that the organizations's monthly client load (from the 5 such facilities in Lesotho has grown to nearly 2000. They urged continued support for VCT centers. DAS Thompson stressed the importance of such facilities as part of the "ABC" approach to combating HIV, to which PSI staff responded affirmatively and said they had emphasized abstinence among youth in urban and rural areas.

¶7. DAS Thompson also discussed various issues with diverse groups including:

- The dinner with Ministers, heads of U.S.-based foundations and private sector members focusing on the U.S.-Lesotho bi-lateral relationship.
- A lunch with stakeholders in civil society, the diplomatic corps, the media and health in which she emphasized the U.S. policy and programs in Lesotho regarding issues such as

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HIV/AIDS, democratization, and regional cooperation. Ms. Thompson noted that the USG currently contributes over \$ 7 million annually to help Lesotho fight HIV/AIDS.

- A dinner with health leaders from parliament, civil society and the private sector that focused on the challenges and sustainability of the health sector and the private-public, regional and continental partnerships.

¶8. Comment: The very busy visit provided an opportunity for DAS Thompson to see first-hand efforts underway to combat HIV/AIDS and the daunting challenges that remain. Also, Ms. Thompson met with a variety of influential Basotho, who greatly appreciated the chance to discuss issues of mutual concern. The visit also provided strong confirmation of the USG's keen interest in Lesotho and commitment to assist the country and its people on vital matters such as HIV/AIDS, consolidation of democracy, and economic growth. End Comment

DAS Thompson did not clear this message sent after her departure.
PERRY